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ABSTRACT

A work awareness curriculum designed to help disabled students develop the core social skills critical to success in the workplace was developed and presented to disabled students in two states. The core social skills were identified in a literature review. The curriculum included activities to increase students' awareness of often-unstated rules/expectations encountered in the workplace in the following areas: dependability, honesty, employee-supervisor relations, employee-coworker relations, organization and initiative, adaptability, attitude, and self-esteem. Among the learning activities included in the curriculum were the following: discussion, role playing, modeling of appropriate responses, applications to students actual/aspired work settings, and activities to explain differences between social expectations at school and work. The curriculum was pilot tested, revised, and presented to 52 7th- through 9th-graders with mild intellectual disabilities in Utah and 53 9th- through 12th-graders with mild disabilities in Georgia. The curriculum's effectiveness was evaluated through a work awareness pretest/posttest administered to 80 of the students. Eighty-nine percent of the first group and 95% of the second group answered more questions correctly on the posttest than on the pretest, thus suggesting that the new curriculum is an effective method of helping disabled students learn some social subtleties of the workplace. (The bibliography contains 20 references. Appended are selected topics in each curriculum area.) (MN)

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IMPACT OF WORK AWARENESS INSTRUCTION FOR ADOLESCENTS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

Inappropriate social behavior is a leading cause of job loss for persons with disabilities. Many have speculated that this is due to a lack of awareness or understanding about the social requirements of the workplace. Therefore, methods to promote social competence must be viewed as one of *the* most important transition goals.

From a review of the literature, the presenter has identified a core of eight social skill areas considered most relevant to success in employment for persons with disabilities. These areas comprise the Work Awareness Curriculum and are as follows:

- Dependability
- Honesty
- Employee - supervisor relations
- Employee - co-worker relations
- Organization and initiative
- Adaptability
- Attitude
- Self-esteem

The objective of the Work Awareness Curriculum is to increase students' awareness of the often unstated rules and expectations that employees encounter in the workplace in each of the above areas.

Instruction from this curriculum has been given to select groups of students with intellectual disabilities in two states. The instruction included discussion, role-playing to increase perspective-taking, modeling of appropriate responses, and applications to students' actual or aspired work settings where applicable. The instruction also outlines many of the differences between the social expectations at school and at work.

To measure the impact of instruction from the Work Awareness Curriculum, a curriculum-based assessment was designed and administered to the participating students. Results from the assessment indicate that, overall, students had more knowledge about appropriate and expected social behaviors in the workplace after receiving the instruction than they had before its presentation. No significant differences were found between males and females, or between those who had work experience and those who did not. These findings suggest that the Work Awareness Curriculum is an effective first step in helping students with disabilities make social transitions from school to work.

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IMPACT OF WORK AWARENESS INSTRUCTION FOR ADOLESCENTS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

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It is well documented that lack of social competence poses a major obstacle to successful employment and independent living for persons with special learning needs (Brickey, Campbell, & Browning, 1985; Chadsey-Rusch, 1992; Cheney & Foss, 1984; Ford, Dineen, & Hall, 1984; Greenspan & Shoultz, 1981; Salzberg, Lignugaris/Kraft, & McCuller, 1988). Research has shown that inappropriate social behavior can lead to peer and co-worker rejection (Greenspan & Shoultz, 1981), and is a leading cause of job loss for persons with intellectual disabilities (Bullis & Foss, 1986; Chadsey-Rusch, 1992; Elksnin, Elksnin, & Sabornie, 1994; La Greca, Stone, & Bell, 1982; Neubert, Tilson, & Ianacone, 1989; Salzberg, Lignugaris/Kraft, & McCuller, 1988). Therefore, methods to promote social competence must be viewed as one of *the* most important transition goals.

When young adults make the transition from school to adult life, society expects them to follow existing social rules in an independent and mature manner (Chadsey-Rusch & O'Reilly, 1992). These social rules are defined by the group, and one's social success is relative to the culture and settings in which an individual typically functions (Greenspan, 1981). Environmental settings determine the types of social responses considered acceptable; a behavior considered appropriate in one setting may be completely inappropriate in another (i.e., social responses appropriate in school may be inappropriate in the workplace). An often overlooked aspect of vocational training for adolescents with special needs is increasing their knowledge of appropriate conduct in *different* settings. Students with special learning needs often require instruction in how to discern and interpret subtle verbal and nonverbal social cues within the context of frequently changing work situations so they can better determine cues that will guide their selection of a social response from a myriad of responses possible. Students with special learning needs must also be prepared to evaluate the consequences that each potential response is likely to receive if performed (Brody & Stoneman, 1977). An evaluation of these consequences cannot take place without knowledge of expected social responses in various settings.

There is little argument that training in appropriate work-related social skills is needed to

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increase the ability of persons with special needs to find and keep jobs (Elksnin & Elksnin, 1991; Foss & Peterson, 1981; Greenspan, Shoultz, & Weir, 1981; Wehman & Hill, 1981). However, there is no clear consensus on what methods are most effective in conducting this training. Greenspan (1981) and others have speculated that inappropriate work-related social behavior may be due to a lack of awareness or understanding about the social requirements of the workplace. Therefore, this study focused on increasing *work awareness* for adolescents with special needs.

Greenspan and Love (in press) stated that competence in normalized work settings includes the ability to understand the often unstated and complex social expectations of supervisors, co-workers and customers. Similarly, Black (1991) found that students with intellectual disabilities frequently did not understand subtle workplace rules relating to social interaction and social reciprocity. There is a basic difference between training for social skills and training for work social awareness. Too often social skill training efforts have focused narrowly on specific skills to be taught and mastered. Education professionals frequently tell individuals with special needs *what* they should do on the job, but seldom explain *why*. This leads to memorization of situation specific social skills that do not generalize to other settings. Korinek and Polloway (1993) stated that a focus on social skill training without addressing broader issues of social competence decreases the likelihood that an individual will generalize and maintain the skill beyond settings where training occurs. A work social awareness approach, however, involves a broader understanding of social processes operating in the workplace and the individual's unique role in reciprocal social interactions. The distinction between focusing on social awareness versus social skills is important when we consider the dynamics of the workplace. Students with special learning needs must be adaptable social problem-solvers to be successful in today's competitive labor market. Providing instruction in work awareness appears to be needed for educators to facilitate vocational and social transitions for these students.

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to describe the Work Awareness Curriculum and its presentation to select groups of students with special learning needs in two states. This paper will describe the Work Awareness Curriculum contents, methods of presentation and evaluation, and results of its use.

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Work Awareness Curriculum

From a review of the literature, a core of eight areas considered most relevant to success in employment for persons with disabilities was identified. These areas comprise the Work Awareness Curriculum and are as follows:

- Dependability
- Honesty
- Employee - supervisor relations
- Employee - co-worker relations
- Organization and initiative
- Adaptability
- Attitude
- Self-esteem

A brief summary of some of the content covered by the curriculum in each area is included in the appendix to this paper.

The objective of the Work Awareness Curriculum is to increase students' awareness of the often unstated rules and expectations that employees encounter in the workplace in each of the above areas. Instruction includes discussion, role-playing to increase perspective-taking, modeling of appropriate responses, and applications to students' actual or aspired work settings where applicable. The instruction also outlines many of the differences between the social expectations at school and at work.

Evaluation

To measure the impact of instruction from the Work Awareness Curriculum, a curriculum-based assessment (the Work Awareness Quiz) was designed. The purpose of the quiz is to determine if students know more about subtle workplace rules and expectations after presentation of the curriculum. Questions for the quiz come directly from the curriculum contents and are based on actual workplace problems experienced by students with special learning needs in vocational skill training and placement programs. The 25 questions take the form of verbally presented scenarios to which the students answer with either a "yes" or a "no" response. Questions are read to the students because the intent is not to test students' reading comprehension levels, but their awareness of expectations and acceptable social responses in the workplace. A pilot test of the curriculum and quiz was conducted with approximately 50

secondary students with mild disabilities in Grades 10 through 12. Based on suggestions from these students and their teachers, changes were made in the quiz.

Presentation of the Work Awareness Curriculum

This final form of the quiz was administered twice (as a pretest and posttest) to participating students in the studies described below. In these studies, the pretest was administered by the students' classroom teachers followed by three one-hour instructional sessions conducted by the researcher. The posttest was then administered by the teachers no longer than one week after the third instructional session.

Participants

The first group of participants to receive instruction from the Work Awareness Curriculum were 52 seventh through ninth graders assigned to self-contained classes for students with mild intellectual disabilities from two different schools in one large Utah school district. Data obtained from 16 students was eliminated due to (a) absences during the pretest, posttest, or more than one of the instructional sessions, and (b) a variation in the way the pretest was presented in one class. Therefore, the matched pretests and posttests for 36 students were used in data analysis. To protect the anonymity of students, the school district did not allow the researcher to obtain information about individual student demographic characteristics.

The second group of participants included 53 ninth through twelfth grade students with mild disabilities [mild intellectual disabilities (MID), learning disabilities(LD), or behavior disorders (BD)] from one school in northeast Georgia. Due to absences during either the pretest or posttest, data from 9 of these students was eliminated, resulting in 44 matched pretests and posttests for use in data analysis. All students were enrolled in the Related Vocational Instruction (RVI) program which provides assistance for students meeting special education eligibility requirements to help them succeed in regular vocational education classes. Information about students' specific disabilities was not revealed to the researcher. Therefore, the number of students classified MID, LD, or BD cannot be reported. However, information was collected on grade, gender, and work experience. Nineteen (43%) of the 44 students were in Grade 9; 10 (23%) were in Grade 10; 10 (23%) in Grade 11; and 5 (11%) were in Grade 12. Thirty-one of the students were male (70%) and 13 female (30%). Thirty-two (73%) of the students had paid work experience and 12 (27%) had no work experience.

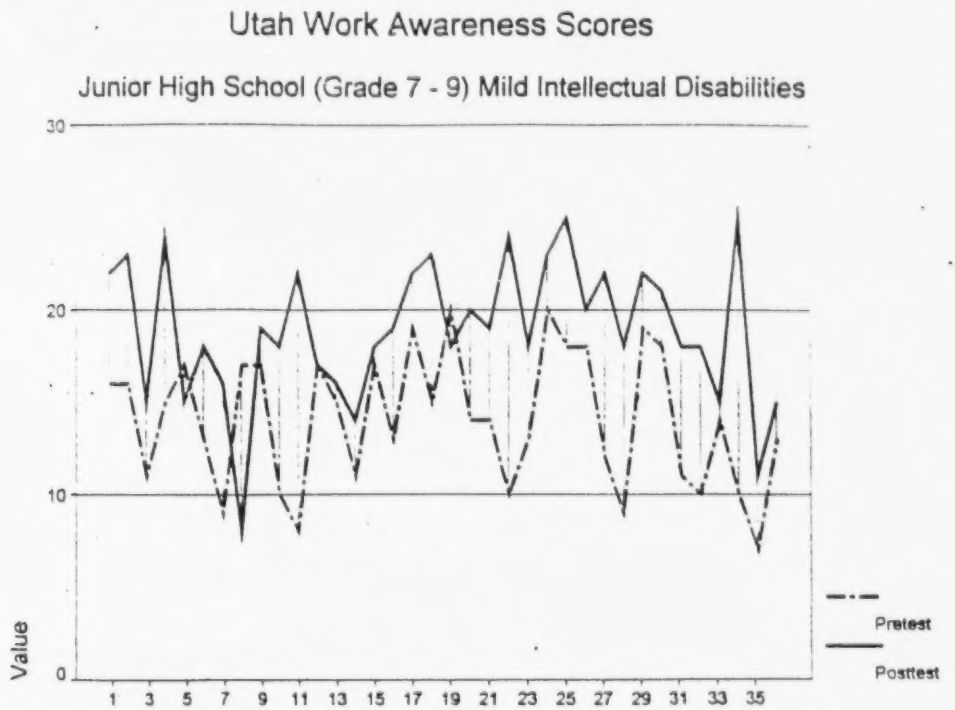
Results

In comparing results of students' pretest and posttest Work Awareness Quiz scores, results indicate that, overall, students had more knowledge about appropriate and expected social behaviors in the workplace after receiving the instruction than they had before its presentation. Thirty-two (89%) of the 36 students in the first group [7th to 9th grade students with mild intellectual disabilities in Utah] scored higher on the posttest than on the pretest. Results of a correlated samples *t* test for pre-post designs indicated that the difference between pretest and posttest scores was statistically significant, $t(35) = 6.15$, $p<.001$. A summary of mean scores and standard deviations for this groups is provided in Table 1 and an illustration of students' scores is presented in Figure 1.

Table 1. Work Awareness Quiz Scores (Utah junior high group)

		Pretest		Posttest	
	n	M	SD	M	SD
All Participants	36	14.06	(3.62)	18.92	(3.87)

Figure 1.



Note: Maximum score is 25.

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For the second group, 42 (95%) of the 44 participants [9th to 12th grade students with mild disabilities (MID, LD, and BD) in Georgia] scored higher on the posttest than on the pretest. Separate 2 x 2 Analysis of Variance procedures were conducted for gender by time (pre-post) and work experience (yes-no) by time. Significant main effects for time (pre-post) were found in the gender by time comparison, $F(42) = 58.41$, $p < .001$. However, there were no significant effects for gender or interaction effects. Significant main effects for time (pre-post) were also found in the work experience by time comparison, $F(42) = 51.44$, $p < .001$. There were no significant effects for work experience or interaction effects. A summary of mean scores and standard deviations for these groups is provided in Table 2 and an illustration of students' scores is presented in Figure 2.

Table 2. Work Awareness Quiz Scores (Georgia high school group)

		Pretest	Posttest
Variables	n	M SD	M SD
All Participants	44	17.45 (2.73)	21.80 (3.32)
Gender:			
Female	13	17.62 (2.29)	22.92 (2.50)
Male	31	17.39 (2.93)	21.32 (3.54)
Work Experience:			
Yes	32	17.78 (2.85)	21.94 (3.40)
No	12	16.58 (2.27)	21.42 (3.23)

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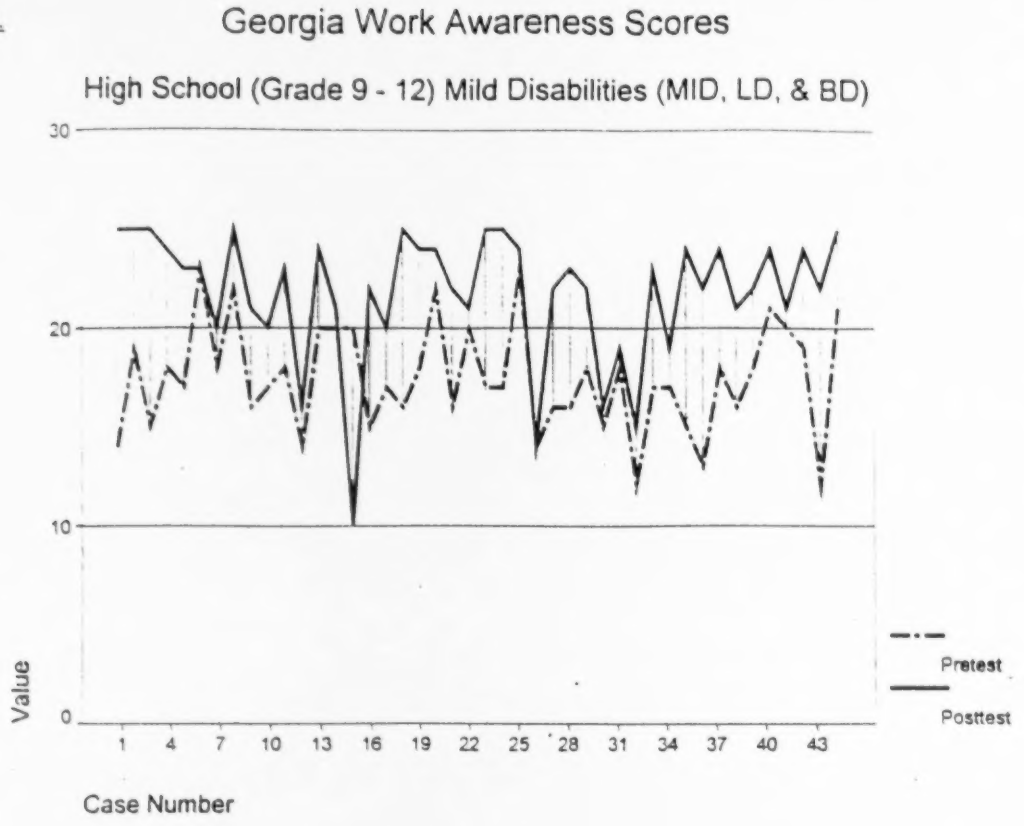
Figure 2.



Note: Maximum score is 25.

Results suggest that overall, participating students with mild disabilities in middle and secondary schools benefitted from work awareness instruction and knew more about subtle social rules and expectations in the workplace after presentation of the curriculum. Scores for males did not differ significantly from scores for females. Scores for those students who had paid work experience did not differ significantly from those who did not have work experience. The most notable finding is that nearly all participating students (89% of the first group and 95% of the second group) answered more questions correctly on the posttest of the Work Awareness Quiz than they did on the pretest.

Future Directions

These findings suggest that presentation of the Work Awareness Curriculum is an effective method of helping students with special needs learn some of the social subtleties of the

workplace. However, several limitations must be considered when interpreting results of this study. Participants were not randomly selected or assigned to treatment conditions. They were purposively selected based on their teachers' interest in preparing students to make the transition from school to work. Therefore, results cannot be generalized beyond these particular students at a specific time in their lives. Second, the improvement in scores may be a reflection of students' ability to recall information rather than a true understanding of the underlying principles. Research in this direction would greatly add to the results of this study and decision-making for future employment training programs for students with special needs. Finally, it was beyond the scope of this particular study to investigate whether students' behavior actually changed as a result of receiving the instruction. Research of this nature is highly recommended and would make a significant contribution to the body of literature in the fields of transition and social skill intervention efforts. More research is certainly needed in this area if students with special needs are to make successful transitions from school to work and independent living. Instruction such as that provided through the Work Awareness Curriculum does appear to beneficial and should be investigated further. Presentation of the Work Awareness Curriculum may prove to be an important first step in assisting students with special learning needs make social transitions from school to work.

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APPENDIX

In each curriculum area, suggestions for role-playing, modeling, and discussion scenarios are provided. Students are asked "what is it about this situation that makes it the same or different from other situations?" The following information represents a portion of each curriculum content area that was presented to participating students.

- Dependability

Depend means counting on someone. Ability means you are able or you can. So, dependability means you can count on someone to do what they are supposed to do.

Just being AT WORK is not enough. You also need to be ready to work, in uniform (if necessary) and with all work materials ready to go at the time you are scheduled.

You must be DEPENDABLE before you can be INDEPENDENT.

Being Independent means "on your own." You do not have to always depend on other people, you are able to depend on yourself.

Explanations and scenarios of when to make appointments and how and when to ask for time off from work are also provided.

- Honesty

Are you allowed to take your desk with you when you leave school? NO

What about taking things with you when you leave work?

What about a cheeseburger? Office supplies (i.e., tape, scissors)? Cleaning supplies? Money?

It is NOT HONEST to make excuses or blame other people.

It is NOT HONEST to take extra breaks at work. When you do this you are stealing time. When you are "punched in" on the time clock, you should be working.

Good employees DO NOT say "It's not my job, someone else will do it."

- Employee - Supervisor Relations

Following instructions is for your own good, usually for safety reasons. Following your supervisor's instructions usually makes the work easier, more efficient, and of better quality.

It is your supervisor's job to see that the work gets done. They have to tell you what to do because that is their job. They are not just trying to "pick on you."

At work, you very rarely get told that you have done a good job. Learn to reward yourself. Employers will not praise you for doing what they are paying you to do. They just expect you to do it. Learn to accept that you will not get praised very often, do not get discouraged, and accept compliments as accomplishments.

- Employee - Co-Worker Relations

  Co-workers do not want to do YOUR work.

  Always finish your work before you leave. Do not leave it for someone else to do.

  When you are late or absent from work, it puts more work on your co-workers.

  Talk to your co-workers BEFORE or AFTER work, during lunch and break times. You should not use work time to socialize. Other people at work will see this as slacking off or not taking the job very seriously.

  If you have a problem with one of your co-workers, go to that person first. If the problem is not solved then go to your immediate supervisor, not to other people (chain of command).

- Organization and Initiative

  Finish one task before you start another.

  Try to never go empty-handed.

  If you see something that needs to be done, you should do it without always having to be asked.

- Adaptability

  Workers must be flexible about their hours for leaving work. Sometimes they will have to stay a little bit longer than expected because of changes in situations.

  Change always happens and usually changes make things better. Bosses do not make changes just to "throw you off." Insisting on doing things the OLD WAY and not changing to new ways does not build good work relations.

- Attitude

  Good employees DO NOT gossip and complain. You should avoid those people at work who do gossip and complain. You do not want to be associated with them.

  Be an ACTOR. Pretend that you LIKE working. (Most students have fun role playing being an actor.)

  If you look for the positive you will find it. If you look for the negative you will find it also and end up dwelling on it.

  Everyone has some bad days. DO NOT give up.

- Self-esteem

  Having a job is part of the personal growth process.

  No one starts at the top. The make their contribution at all levels and prove their worth.

  All jobs are important and no work is degrading. Find out how your job fits in with and contributes to the big picture.

Good employees have PRIDE in their work and know why THEY are IMPORTANT to the company.

Celebrate small accomplishments. Set goals no matter how small so that work is always a challenge. keep the bigger goals of independence and self-sufficiency in mind.

Tell someone about something good that happened, or something you did well at work every day.

Remember - when you work, you are a contributing member of society and part of the nation's workforce.

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